

Political Advertising in Democratic Taiwan Audiences' Perspectives on Political Figures through Image- Building Advertisements

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Abstract

One can gain important insights into the effects of political advertising by looking at decoding and interpretation in audience perception studies. This essay considers two genres of political advertisement—celebrity endorsement and emotional appeal—through six focus groups formed by either Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) or Kuomintang (KMT) identifiers. It focuses on three key themes for comparison: the participants' involvement, their interpretations of the key messages, and opinions that were important to them. This study aims to further the understanding of how political advertisements are interpreted and to bring some practical knowledge to the field by comparing the perspectives of audiences of differing political orientations.

Key words: Taiwan, election, democracy, political advertising, image-building, audience.

Taiwan's 2000 Presidential Election: An Introduction

Elections, integral to representative democracy, are heavily influenced by the media and political consultants.¹ The impact of the media and political marketing on voters' choices has often escaped the attention of political scientists, who

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¹ Mark Wheeler, *Politics and the Mass Media* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 239-254, and Larry Powell and Joseph Cowart, *Political Campaign Communication: Inside and Out* (Boston, MA: Pearson Education, 2003), 94-101.

are obsessed mainly with the effects of the macro-environment and institutions on election outcomes. Conversely, scholars of marketing communications are often too narrowly focused on the cause-and-effect relationship that a single political advertisement may entail.

The literature² already has pointed out that politicians often need the assistance of different types of communication specialists. Such assistance is an essential part of elections today.³ At the same time, these specialists cannot communicate successfully without understanding the intended audiences. Some even admit that their work is merely an echo of their audiences' inner desires.⁴ Therefore, it is rather strange for academics to take voters' responses to modern democratic discourse lightly. This essay combines macro- and micro-levels of studies of political marketing, using Taiwan's presidential election of 2000 as an important case to tease out a few critical elements in political advertisements that may affect an audience's evaluation of the leading candidates. More than any other presidential election held in Taiwan, the 2000 election can provide fruitful insights into the effects of political advertisements. Additionally, study of the 2000 election is related to some general questions, such as the role of political marketing in young democracies and its influence on the balance between effective campaigning and political integrity.

Since Taiwan deregulated its restrictions on political advertising TV spots in 1991, politicians and advertising agencies have aggressively tried to embrace this instrument by learning from countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.⁵ During this period, many memorable press and television advertisements have been created. In spite of the growing amount of research on political communication in Taiwan, few studies have employed qualitative methods to explore how audiences receive, interpret, and discuss differing categories of political advertising appeals.

This study addresses the noted gap by adopting the methods commonly used in commercial brand advertising research to focus on two of the television

² Dennis Kavanagh, *Election Campaigning: The New Marketing of Politics* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 17.

³ Dennis E. Kinsey, "Political Consulting—Bridging the Academic and Practical Perspectives," in *Handbook of Political Marketing*, ed. Bruce I. Newman (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1999), 113.

⁴ Norman Peng and Chris Hackley, "Political Marketing Communications Planning in the UK and Taiwan: Comparative Insights from Leading Practitioners," *Marketing Intelligence and Planning* 25, nos. 4-5 (April 2007): 483-498.

⁵ Cheng Tzu-leong, *Jingxuan guanggao, lilun, celue yanjiu anli* [Election campaign advertising, theory, and strategy: Case studies] (Taipei: Cheng Chung, 1995); id., *Jingxuan chuanbo yu Taiwan shehui* [Election campaign communication and Taiwan society] (Taipei: Yangzhi wenhua, 2004); and Gary Rawnsley, "As Edifying as a Bout of 'Mud Wrestling': The 2000 Presidential Election Campaign in Taiwan," in *Political Communications in Greater China: The Construction and Reflection of Identity*, ed. Gary Rawnsley and Ming-Yeh T. Rawnsley (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 103-123.

spots used during the 2000 presidential election campaign. This election, although held some years ago, has been chosen for study because it played an important role in Taiwan's political history and, during it, campaign leaders and their advisers pioneered the use of image-building genre in Taiwanese political advertising. It was the second genuine and direct presidential election since the Kuomintang (KMT, 國民黨) had retreated to Taiwan after losing the civil war to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in 1949,⁶ and the first time that the KMT had lost ruling executive power since 1949. Furthermore, the outcome of the election was surprising to many, which begs the question of how influential the advertising spots may have been.

This research focuses on two Democratic Progressive Party (DPP, 民主進步黨) political advertisements through focus groups formed among politically aware individuals. By interpreting their points of view, this study intends to explore the views of the voters and the politicians' use of image-building advertisements. This essay examines: (1) the individual's responses to political advertisements; (2) the discourse of the group members about political advertisements; and (3) other unplanned but significant discussions by the groups on elections, democracy, and Taiwan's political institutions. Last but not least, with their responses interpreted, this research places the responses into the context of other elections and democracy, in general, in order to contribute to the understanding of modern election engineering in democratic societies. Adoption of a qualitative and interpretive approach rather than the quantitative method, which is often employed in political marketing research, has several advantages: it permits examination of the voters' reasons in their own words rather than through questions designed by the researcher; it allows for interactive discussions among members of a group to generate further opinions, instead of using surveys or interviews; and, perhaps most importantly, the method permits the researchers to explore the process of how participants view and discuss political advertisements rather than the results of their opinions as most surveys would generate.

General Overview of the 2000 Presidential Election

At this point, some further context regarding the 2000 presidential election in Taiwan might be helpful. As we noted above, the outcome of this election was widely regarded as a surprise. The opposition DPP candidate, Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁), was popular and regarded as a competent leader because of his good track record throughout his political career. However, the DPP was not only associated with some negative images, such as violence and a radical political agenda, but also it had yet to establish a credible reputation in national-level

⁶ Denny Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003).

politics because of the KMT's monopoly of political resources through the garrison command and patron-client relationship with the local political power since its retreat from mainland China to Taiwan. To be more precise, the cross-Strait relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC) has been one of the issues that has concerned many voters in Taiwan's democratic elections and the KMT has been perceived as able to provide "stability and continuity" in this respect.⁷ This perception has stemmed from the KMT's struggle against the Chinese Communist Party since its founding in 1921. The KMT's position and attitude toward the CCP generally have been perceived as more predictable and conventional than those of the KMT's opposition.

Despite this concern, in 2000, Chen won 39 percent of the popular vote and gained a plurality, partly because the KMT suffered from negative images, including allegations of corruption in the forms of "kickbacks" and "blackgold."⁸ Another important factor was the KMT's split into two factions after the party's presidential nomination. One faction was led by the former vice president, Lien Chan (連戰), while the other was led by Lien's KMT comrade, James Chu-yu Soong (宋楚瑜), who was more popular but did not gain the KMT's nomination. Lien and Soong, who ran an independent presidential campaign, gained 23 percent and 36 percent of the popular vote, respectively.⁹ Additionally, the well-respected Nobel Prize winner Lee Yuan-tseh's (李遠哲) endorsement in the late stage of the campaign gave a crucial boost to Chen's share of the vote.¹⁰

Although the KMT outspent the DPP in political advertising by a ratio of approximately four to one, the DPP's advertisements received a far more positive response, despite the party's limited resources. The DPP not only defended itself against the KMT's attack on its lack of experience and ability to manage the cross-Strait relationship, but also it successfully attacked the KMT on corruption, helping to legitimize its "time for change" appeal.¹¹

⁷ Ibid., 227, and Shelley Rigger, *From Opposition to Power: Taiwan's Democratic Progressive Party* (London: Lynne Rienner, 2001), 180-181.

⁸ Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, 205-206, and Cheng, *Jingxuan chuanbo yu Taiwan shehui*, 277.

⁹ Central Election Commission, 2005, <http://210.69.23.140/vote3.asp?pass1=A2000A0000000000aaa>.

¹⁰ Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, 227, and Rigger, *From Opposition to Power*, 194-197.

¹¹ Cheng, *Jingxuan chuanbo yu Taiwan shehui*, 276-277, and Norman Peng and Chris Hackley, "Can Image Advertising Be Decisive in Political Campaigns? A Case Exploration of the Taiwanese Presidential Elections of 2000," paper presented at the Political Studies Association Conference, panel on Political Party Marketing #704, 2003.

The DPP's Successful Agenda Management and Political Marketing Effort: The Cross-Strait Relationship and Lee Yuan-tseh's Endorsement

During the 2000 presidential campaign, three issues played a crucial role: James Soong's mud-fight with Lien Chan during the later stages of the campaign; the candidates' stances on the cross-Strait relationship; and Lee Yuan-tseh's endorsement.¹² The first incident was mainly the result of the KMT's internal conflict. However, the latter two factors could be considered the result of the DPP's successful campaign manipulation of public opinion through image-building and celebrity endorsement. Moreover, these two factors were also the key content for the TV spots used in the present study. Therefore, it will be useful to review the relevant literature.

The DPP and Chen's position on national identity has been their most controversial ideological issue.¹³ By advocating further and formal independence of Taiwan, the DPP had rapidly gained popularity following its founding, but soon some of its ideologies became liabilities rather than assets.¹⁴ The majority of Taiwan's population has always been concerned about the opportunity cost of separation from the People's Republic of China by declaring de jure independence. There are various reasons for this, such as the fear of war with China, the perceived importance of economic attachment to China, simple political inertia, and fear of radical change.¹⁵

According to Cheng Tzu-leong, the KMT had appealed to public fear regarding the cross-Strait relationship several times in elections during the early and mid-1990s, with good results.¹⁶ Any effort to neutralize the KMT's appeal to fear proved difficult for the DPP until May 1999, when the party passed a Resolution on the Future of Taiwan, with the promise that the DPP would engage in cross-Strait policies with caution, in part by maintaining that Taiwan was de facto independent, thereby accepting that there was no need for further constitutional formalization.¹⁷ The spot "Safety" was created to reassure voters

¹² Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, 230.

¹³ Ibid., 228, 230, and Rigger, *From Opposition to Power*, 161.

¹⁴ Kuo Jeng-liang, *Mingjingdang zhuanxing zhi tong* [The DDP's ordeal facing transformation] (Taipei: Tianxia wenhua chubanshe, 1998), 11-12, 60-62.

¹⁵ Shyu Huo-yan, "Taiwan xuanmin de guojia rengtong yu dangpai toupiao xingwei: 1991 zhi 1993 nian jian de shizheng yanjiu jieguo" [National identity and partisan voting behavior in Taiwan: Evidence from survey data between 1991 and 1993], *Taiwan zhengzhi xuekan* [Taiwanese Political Science Review] 1 (1996): 85-127; You Ying-lung, "Taiwan zuqun rengtong de zhengzhi xinli fenxi" [Ethnic identity in Taiwan: A politico-psychological analysis], *Taiwan zhengzhi xuekan* 1 (1996): 41-84; Peng Huai-en, *Taiwan zhengzhi wenhua de boxi* [Analyzing Taiwan's political culture] (Taipei: Fengyun luntan, 1997); and Stephane Corcuff, *Fenghe rinuan: Taiwan waishengren yu guojia rentong de zhuanbian* [Light wind, warm sun: Taiwan's mainlanders and the transition of national identity] (Taipei: Yunchen wenhua, 2004).

¹⁶ Cheng, *Jingxuan guanggao, lilun, celu yanjiu anli*, 40-42.

¹⁷ Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, 228.

through emotional and rational appeals that there was no reason why Chen would endanger his family and the people he cared for, all of whom resided in Taiwan, by provoking conflict with the People's Republic of China. Cheng mentioned that this series of advertisements was crucially important to many voters, who previously had doubted Chen's ability and sincerity regarding the preservation of stability in the cross-Strait relationship.¹⁸

Another tactic was the use of celebrity endorsement. The recommendations from social elites in TV spots were considered to be one of the highlights in Chen's victory.¹⁹ Among them, Lee Yuan-tseh's endorsement was particularly important.²⁰ Through the combination of news management and political advertisements, these elites' support not only redeemed Chen's and the DPP's lack of national political experience, but also made Chen an idol who could give people hope and take Taiwan to another level of national development and international stature.

Chen's emphasis on his sincerity to maintain a stable cross-Strait relationship and Lee's endorsement were quite different in nature; nonetheless, both were used as advertising content by the DPP and have been studied by academics. The DPP's astute use of these two "episodes" for political advertisements was crucial to catapulting its candidate to a leading position in the presidential race. However, the existing studies on such political advertisements in the 2000 campaign are mainly descriptive and quantitative, and so are not specialized in terms of capturing voters' in-depth, subtle, or even hidden feelings and thoughts. This is unusual, since Western academics and practitioners readily acknowledge the benefits of the interpretive approach while analyzing qualitative data. The interpretive approach is different from statistical analysis since it focuses on seeking insightful descriptions of a particular issue or findings in its context, rather than on making generalized claims.²¹ With the above background now provided, the following section will describe how our research was designed and executed, and its methodological framework and justifications.

Research Approach

As mentioned earlier, few scholars in Taiwan had researched this essay's topic through focus groups and the interpretive approach, despite the obvious benefits. For instance, the interpretive approach can be adopted in research that aims to obtain more in-depth and sophisticated insights.²² Focus groups can

¹⁸ Cheng, *Jingxuan chuanbo yu Taiwan shehui*, 226, 265-266.

¹⁹ Rigger, *From Opposition to Power*, 193.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, and Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, 228.

²¹ Chris Hackley, *Doing Research Projects in Marketing, Management and Consumer Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 8-11.

²² *Ibid.*, 97-100.

be especially useful for mass media-related research because they can build a “comfort zone” in which “the synergy can generate more than the sum of the individual inputs.”²³ The term “comfort zone” within the context of focus groups means that individuals often are stimulated by each other to provide additional input.

The details of the participants’ backgrounds can be found in the tables below. The six focus group discussions were mostly conducted in local cafés to create a friendly and open atmosphere. They ranged from 25 to 50 minutes in length. The researcher first outlined the purpose of the study to the group and provided relevant information, before showing the TV spots “Safety” and then “Hope.” Following these spots, the researcher introduced lead-off questions to start the discussion. All of the focus group discussions were audio-recorded with the participants’ permission, and then partially transcribed.

The reason why “Safety” and “Hope” were selected was because of their significance regarding Taiwan’s 2000 presidential election and the understanding of the different image-building approaches that these spots used. “Safety” aimed to build Chen’s image of ordinariness and to counter-attack his opponents’ accusations regarding his ability to manage the cross-Strait relationship.²⁴ “Hope” capitalized on Lee Yuan-tseh’s and the other social elites’ high popularity, and thus the importance of their endorsement of Chen.²⁵ Both techniques can be found in commercial practice. The former is similar to brand advertising, and the latter attempts to gain additional value by creating a successful public relationship.

This research gathered the participants’ opinions only about DPP ads for two main reasons. First, although including KMT as well as DPP ads would have had its merits, it also would have drastically increased the length of the discussion, therefore causing unnecessary inconvenience to the participants. Second, by means of its design, this study is able to compare how the supporters viewed the ads that were aired by their affiliated party, and how the opponent’s supporters viewed the same ads. Including KMT ads could have caused confusion or even proved redundant.

This research included only KMT and DPP identifiers, based on their loose self-identification. After reviewing the parties’ support rate, voter turnout, and vote distribution, this study did not include neutral voters because it was assumed that voters, in general, would vote strategically, one way or another.

Once the transcripts had been collected, they were organized and categorized according to their topic importance to the participants. Apart from the topics that were extensively discussed, some of the remarks and thoughts that caught

²³ David Morrison, *Search for a Method-Focus Group and the Development of Mass Media Communication Research* (Luton, England: University of Luton Press, 1998), 168.

²⁴ Cheng Tzu-leong, *Jingxuan chuanbo yu Taiwan shehui* (Taipei: Yangzhi wenhua, 2004), 266.

²⁵ Ibid.

Table 1. Focus Group

DPP groups	Number of group members	KMT groups	Number of group members
1 (July 24, 2005)	7	1 (July 25, 2005)	7
2 (July 24, 2005)	6	2 (July 31, 2005)	6
3 (August 14, 2005)	6	3 (August 14, 2005)	5

All focus groups met in Taipei City's private estates, mainly in restaurants and cafés.

Table 2. Focus Group Background Summary

Total participants	37
DPP: KMT	19:18
Male: Female	14:23
Education level ration (U: P: O: N/A)*	24:10:1:2
Career status (W: S: O)	23:10:4

* U= Undergraduate, P= Postgraduate, O=Other

** W= Working, S= Student, O=Other

the researcher's attention were also included for further discussion.

The complexity of media reception is difficult to capture in a single study. However, the important concern is to select an appropriate approach, depending on the purpose of the study, and to be aware of its strengths and limitations.²⁶ During this research, the central analytical method employed was similar to Morley's *Nationwide* study. In his research, the audience's response to the program was divided into three categories: dominant-hegemonic reading (sometimes called preferred-reading), negotiated reading, and oppositional reading.²⁷ This approach is used to describe the level of agreement among the encoder, the message, and the decoder of the message. For instance, if an individual concurs overall with a particular political advertisement, then he/she will be labelled as having a dominant-hegemonic reading. If the individual shares only part of its value, then he/she will be labelled as having a negotiated

²⁶ Morrison, *Search for a Method-Focus Group and the Development of Mass Media Communication Research*, 168.

²⁷ David Morley, *Television, Audiences and Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 2002), 117-118.

reading. Lastly, if an individual rejects the overall content of the message, his/her interpretation will be described as oppositional reading. When applied to this study, the audience's response to the presentation, the message itself, and the group participants' discussion with one another were all taken into consideration when inferring their collective position from the individual responses to the political advertisement. This particular methodology had its strengths and merits, which are reflective and flexible; nonetheless, there were also some limitations and shortcomings. For instance, the sample size and selection and the method used mean that the findings are not necessarily true of wider populations or circumstances. They are specific to this study, although their wider relevance cannot be ruled out, as the method used was systematic and well-informed.²⁸ Furthermore, the transcripts gathered from the focus groups must be examined carefully, since this was not a participant observation or ethnographic study.²⁹ Last but not least, the researcher's and mediator's influence needs to be taken into account.

Apart from the methodology, the issue of the time lag between the fieldwork and the actual election was another concern. Some academics suggest that practitioners often use focus groups to pretest TV ads,³⁰ however, this research was conducted after the election, due to resource constraints.

The time lag could have caused the participants to have different cognitive and affective states in focus group discussions than they had during the 2000 presidential election. Hence, this study's ability to draw a correlation between the participants' feelings, thoughts, and behaviors through ad exposure is limited. On the other hand, one assumption made for this research was that the influence of the time lag should be less a factor than some scholars might anticipate due to the high frequency and intensity of elections in Taiwan. More importantly, the purpose of this research was primarily to explore how voters view, interpret, and discuss political ads, rather than to focus strictly on the effect of the ads on them during the election, thereby making time lag a less important factor. While in the field, the mediator rarely had to remind the participants to stick to the topic after the initial briefing.

Presentation and Discussion of the DPP Participants' Feedback on "Safety"

The Democratic Progressive Party's participants had a quite favorable reaction to "Safety," in general, as well as to its specific details, such as the use of imagery and music. That is why this study categorizes their responses as

²⁸ Ibid., 159, and Hackley, *Doing Research Projects in Marketing, Management and Consumer Research*, 8.

²⁹ Hackley, *Doing Research Projects in Marketing, Management and Consumer Research*, 153.

³⁰ Powell and Cowart, *Political Campaign Communication: Inside and Out*, 173.

consistent with the dominant-hegemonic reader response, referred to above.

Regarding the overall presentation style, the participants were relatively keen on the ad's format and had a strongly favorable attitude toward it:

It is like watching a story... about a person who was born in Taiwan and grew up, his surroundings...it is not...like Lien Chan, the impression we have is his father was an official. Don't know how ordinary people live their lives. In the first ad, you feel he is the person around you. Today he is here; his thinking will do something for us. (Respondent F)

From the participants' responses, this ad seemed to connect with the DPP audience in a positive way. During different stages of this ninety-second advertisement, Chen Shui-bian's common background, the ordinary people and places shown, and the filming technique all contributed to the DPP audiences' overall positive feelings and sense of connection with the advertisement.

Surprisingly, even though the DPP participants were very positive about "Safety," after they expressed their positive views, they began to rationalize the spot in terms of audiences who were different from themselves.

I think the appeal [of "Safety"] is targeted at the fundamentalists, or should I say dark green fundamentalists. (Respondent B)

As mentioned earlier, they [the target audience of "Safety"] may be the lower education group....(Respondent H)

According to Kuo,³¹ the "fundamentalists" are a faction of opinion within the DPP. They have gained importance within the party since the early 1990s by advocating a rather conservative and confrontational approach toward the cross-Straits relationship, manifested through academia, culture, technology, sports, art, and politics. However, based on the comments of the participants in the DPP focus groups, it appears that they might have had a slightly different understanding of the term "fundamentalists." They used the term as a way of marking a contrast between themselves and the wider public, whose demographic and social-economic background was very different from their own. These focus group participants were quite young, mainly resident in Taipei, and with access to higher education at some of Taiwan's top universities. Because of their sense of being members of the educated elite, they felt that they were better-informed voters than most and could be more objective when

³¹ Kuo Jeng-liang, *Mingjindang zhuanxing zhi tong* [The DPP's ordeal facing transformation] (Taipei: Tianxia wenhua chubanshe, 1998), 112-117.

exposed to political ads. In commercial advertising research, it is common for people to deny that they are influenced by advertising, even though their behavior contradicts this assertion.³² In response to political advertisements, the audience's mindset could be even more complex, since the concentration is not only on marketing and advertising but also on politics and beliefs.

As mentioned earlier, the issue of the time lag limited this study's relevance to the effectiveness of each of the two political ads. However, the audiences in this study still touched upon politics and their personal beliefs during discussion. On the whole, the "Safety" spot generated some positive emotional affiliations. For instance, one participant said,

Putting emotion into it... for me, I am touched. But, of course, I don't have much choice to choose from. If we say blue and green, there is no choice. I will vote green. (Respondent S)

Positive emotional affiliations raised two issues concerning Taiwan's democratic practices and the use of political advertisements. First and foremost, there is a potential contradiction among the audiences. On the one hand, the DPP participants thought that the "Safety" ad was for "fundamentalists," by which they meant audiences with lower educational attainment than themselves. On the other hand, they admitted to being personally "touched" by the appeal.

The second issue is polarized campaigns and voters' decision-making. Despite the fact that commercial and political advertising share some similarities, voter involvement during high-level, intensive elections limits political advertising's role to a tool for reinforcement rather than for conversion.

Perhaps due to the significance of the 2000 presidential election and the participants' political awareness, the participants were able to recall the election, then make connections with Chen Shui-bian's advertising strategy. This is important because it displayed the ability of audience participants to draw on their knowledge and experience to evaluate a political ad, rather than simply reacting to it by interacting with the media text on a superficial level.

Presentation and Discussion of the KMT Participants' Feedback on "Safety"

The KMT's focus group participants interpreted the content of "Safety" and its key messages similarly to the DPP participants. They were divided when discussing whether they liked the ad, but again united when considering its effect on them. They also made some negative remarks about the ad's potential target audiences. Some of them did not accept the integrity of "Safety," due

³² Chris Hackley, *Advertising and Promotion: Communicating Brands* (London and Taiwan: Sage, 2005, and Mega Publishing House, 2006, respectively).

to its use of language and the overall values embedded in it. At times, they expressed their oppositional-reading through a sceptical attitude and even cruel cynicism.

However, even the KMT participants had to admit that the use of imagery in “Safety” made it a good spot, despite their overall negative attitudes toward it. The emphasis on Chen Shui-bian’s ordinariness and the good old days generated some interesting remarks. For example, one participant commented,

I think he used many childhood memories; our childhood memory as well. Once you saw the first image, you are walking into an era of innocence in contrast with today’s chaos....You will forget the real world which we live in now. You will think we are in a time when everything is simple. And the feeling that there is a good man....(Respondent AJ)

From the perspective of advertising presentation, the KMT participants’ comments have some crucial significance. One particular aspect is that audiences of different partisanship were both impressed by the filming technique of “Safety,” which suggested that it is possible to engage in a positive way with audiences of the oppositional party and persons who have yet to decide for whom to vote.

The DPP audiences, as presented earlier, thought that “Safety” was meant to emphasize Chen Shui-bian’s ordinariness and reduce voters’ doubts about his ability to handle the cross-Strait relationship. KMT audiences had a similar interpretation:

During the first ad, he uses the fact that his relatives are all in Taiwan to make the point that, if he is elected, he will maintain stability because his relatives are all in Taiwan. He will let Taiwan move forward. In other words, there is logic behind the emotional appeal. (Respondent AA)

One function of advertising under most circumstances is to communicate, with the hope that audiences will respond in the way that is desired by the agency, client, or politician. The “Safety” ad can be considered successful in this aspect because Chen Shui-bian’s intention was to build his image of ordinariness and to reassure the voters about his sincerity to manage the cross-Strait relationship adroitly. This also suggests that partisanship could have a minor influence on how voters understand the meaning of an ad, assuming that it is a presentable spot.

Yet, it would be a mistake to assume that “Safety” was a successful ad among KMT audiences. Although the initial feedback from KMT participants was positive, soon their criticism and negative attitudes began to build. When it came to this spot’s effect on them, some KMT group members stated that

they were divided from the others regarding their attitude toward the spot in isolation, versus their attitude toward Chen:

Maybe it is because of us, or because I don't like Chen Shui-bian. I think he lacks self-respect at times. Something he says will make people wonder if he doesn't want his face [meaning that he does not strive to appear shameless]. So, when I look at the first ad, I would think this is a good ad, but it will not change my attitude towards him. This is certainly a good ad, very warm, such good old days. (Respondent AG)

The way he shoots this, it is quite touching. You may dislike this person, but you won't dislike this ad. (Respondent AI)

Based on the KMT participants' responses, there seemed to be divided opinion, pointing toward the possibility that political advertising is weak in terms of conversion.³³ Despite the favorable attitude that the "Safety" ad built by means of filming technique, partisanship still seemed to be a strong force against Chen. This led the researchers to rethink whether political advertisements are potentially persuasive in elections, as held by some academics and often asserted by ad agencies.

Finally, the KMT audiences also tried to identify the potential target audiences who were likely to have been influenced by the "Safety" spot, as their DPP counterparts had done. Their cynicism and criticism reached a peak during this part of the discussion. One participant's remark summarized the KMT participants' general belief: "I still think it ["Safety"] is for the lower class" (Respondent T).

Both the DPP and KMT audiences, despite their party affiliations, thought that "Safety" was not targeted at them but at audiences from a rather disadvantaged background. Our interpretation is that, like their counterparts, the KMT audiences were representative of only a segment of voters who were relatively young, educated, and socio-economically better-off than most voters. Therefore, the type of presentation technique that "Safety" employed, whether it was the content, imagery, or music, might have triggered alarm concerning their self-perception and caused them to be critical of the spot. It is worth mentioning that none of the audience members from either party could specifically identify the elements and reasons why they thought "Safety" was aimed at "fundamentalists," "the lower class," or a "lower education group."

³³ Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar, *Going Negative* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 75.

The DPP Participants' Feedback on "Hope"

This section lays out the DPP identifiers' views on the spot "Hope," and then proposes that they, in general, had a dominant-reading of the spot, but with a rather apathetic attitude. First, a number of participants had watched this spot during the election, largely because of Nobel laureate Lee Yuan-tseh's reputation, popularity, and role-model image. The following is a reflection on the influence of Lee and other social elites during the campaign:

[Lee Yuan-tseh] represents a clean social stream; Lee Yuan-tseh represents academia, Lin Huai-min [林懷民] represents the art field, and Hsu Wen-long [許文龍] represents business. It represents people from all fields....These people themselves represent a different group of people from those individuals who side with the KMT through bribery and kickback....
(Respondent B)

Celebrity endorsement is widely studied by commercial and political scholars. It is aimed at associating the individual's "authority and status" with the party and the candidate.³⁴ From the audience members' reflections during the 2000 presidential campaign, Lee Yuan-tseh and other social elites successfully transferred their positive images through their endorsements to Chen Shui-bian and the DPP. This feedback is quite interesting when we combine it with the participants' earlier view that the audiences of "Safety" were "deep-green fundamentalists," "lower class," and "less educated." The speculation is that these audience members' self-perception played an important role. They saw these elites as role models and as persons who could inspire them.

As the discussion progressed, the research strengthened the assumption that voters, like consumers, can be influenced by a campaign, if it is carefully designed, targeted, and executed. Despite the increasing boredom that participants showed during the latter stage of the discussion, they still thought that "Hope" influenced them, as well as the general public, during the campaign. As one participant observed, "From the 2000's context, it was successful to me. Many People were influenced by Lee..."(Respondent A).

This study's design and focus were not on establishing the cause and effect relationship between advertising exposure and audience behavior. Nonetheless, the audiences felt that it was important for them to share their experience about the "Hope" ad and the 2000 presidential election with one another and the researcher. Several explanations can be offered about this development in the audiences' discussions. One is related to the methodology used in the focus

³⁴ Brian McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 96.

groups. Sometimes within focus groups, the participants will perform in a manner that they think will help them to interact within the group and to be favored by the researcher.³⁵ Another explanation for their discussion is related to the significance of the elites' endorsements. The endorsements were covered by many media and favored the DPP's election outcome; hence, Lee's and other social elites' endorsements were a topic to which all DPP participants could relate and share with one another, without worrying about the possibility of provoking disagreement among the other group members.

As with the ad "Safety," the participants also tried to analyze the potential target audiences of the "Hope" spot. It seemed to be a subtle, third-person process which they used to declare their evaluation and own identification with the ad:

It is targeted at middle or slightly Green [DPP and its affiliates] voters.... (Respondent B)

The second one ["Hope"] is more for the middle class or highly educated people. (Respondent K)

The terms the participants used were far gentler and more positive in tone than those used to describe the perceived audience for "Safety." When combined with the DPP audience members' earlier feedback, this suggests that the DPP participants in this study were showing more affiliation with "Hope," despite finding it less entertaining than "Safety." Their feedback could be attributed to how they viewed themselves as voters, based on their background and self-expectations. One implication of this is that effective political advertising must connect with the audience's self-perception and desired socio-economic status.

The KMT Participants' Feedback on "Hope"

The focus groups formed by KMT-supporting participants generally had a negotiated-reading of "Hope." They agreed with the importance of this spot to the election and considered the ad to have been successful, in part because it correctly highlighted the KMT's shortcomings. However, they still distrusted this ad because of their political affiliation and, more importantly, their dislike of Chen. To be more precise, their attitude toward the ad was rather indifferent. Compared to the DPP participants, who also spent more time discussing "Safety" than "Hope," the KMT participants virtually ignored this spot, after

³⁵ Morrison, *Search for a Method-Focus Group and the Development of Mass Media Communication Research*, 184.

admitting that the celebrities in it had a positive and important impact on Chen Shui-bian's electoral victory. What is even more interesting is that Lee Yuan-tseh's name was mentioned only a few times by the KMT participants, although they still had a high recollection of his endorsement of Chen:

I think as long as you have a TV set at home, you must have seen it before. (Respondent W)

I don't have a TV in my flat but I still saw it. (Respondent V)

It is essential to emphasize not only the competitive but also the cooperative relationship between politics and the media.³⁶ By reviewing earlier campaign literature as well as audience feedback, it can be said that Chen Shui-bian was able to capitalize on Lee Yuan-tseh's endorsement by integrating public relations with advertising, thus enhancing his positive media coverage as well as his public image. The relationship between politics and the media has been discussed, experienced, and regulated,³⁷ but mainly in Western countries. The situation is often different and unique for young democracies such as Taiwan, where the relationships among the media, politicians, and the public still need further self-regulation, lawmaking, and active citizen participation. This is possibly why Lee's endorsement was so successful at the time, while endorsements rarely have similar effects in today's Western democracies and elections.

As mentioned above, the KMT audience members were relatively indifferent about "Hope," but there were several more fascinating topics that surfaced from the group discussions that can be considered. For example, regarding celebrities' endorsement of Chen, two participants offered,

The impact on swing voters may be bigger....When they see these people [celebrities] support Chen, they may feel "Oh! There must be some good reasons why they support Chen, so maybe I should too".... (Respondent AI)

I do have a strong feeling towards the second ad ["Hope"], because I used to work in Cloud Gate Dance Theatre [雲門舞集]. When I see teacher Lin Huai-min, it makes me wonder about these people who have a strong spiritual influence.... Inside Cloud Gate, the atmosphere is clear. It is all green [referring to the DPP]....(Respondent AJ)

³⁶ McNair, *An Introduction to Political Communication*, 64-65.

³⁷ Vincent Mosco, *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal* (London: Sage, 1996), 37-59.

The first extract above reflects one participant's thoughts about why celebrity endorsement could be influential. This again suggests that audiences can be rational and sensible in terms of trying to understand political ads, despite their lack of relevant academic knowledge or professional training. This type of participant analysis challenges some of the prevailing views in the literature that political advertising is actually less persuasive on voters who have little sense of affiliation.³⁸ Other scholars have also suggested that the key to successful coat-tailing depends on the endorser's attributes and whether they can be connected to the candidate.³⁹ To recap, the effect of endorsement in commercial and political marketing can vary widely, depending on a variety of reasons, some of which can be controlled by the candidate while others cannot. The compliment of the second extract can provide additional insights into the influence of celebrities on voters. This participant had had first-hand experience working with a celebrity who was featured in "Hope." This participant had worked for the Cloud Gate Dance Theater with Lin Huai-min, and still had great respect for him, calling him "Teacher Lin." She also mentioned that most of her colleagues supported Chen Shui-bian; however, she did not change her voting decision, despite the fact that the mood, the people, and her mentor were in favor of Chen at the time. On the other hand, she did not deny that celebrity influence could be great.

The KMT participants did not spend much time on the possible target audiences of "Hope," but the observation is that they had a comparatively neutral attitude about the characteristics of such audiences.

Implications

Examining the participants' responses enables us to raise a number of questions. The first two are: What can we learn about election advertising strategy through the two political spots, "Safety" and "Hope," and, how is political advertising different or similar to its commercial counterpart? A third question is raised about Taiwan's electioneering methods, when compared to established democracies and the phenomenon of the Americanization of politics. Answers to the first two questions have implications for academics as well as for marketing practitioners, since today's marketing agencies have such high stakes in elections.⁴⁰

As a single commercial advertisement, "Safety" could be considered a better ad than "Hope" in the eyes of the audiences, since it not only generated awareness and interest, but also promoted an enthusiastic discussion. Some participants even mentioned that they would have liked to have cast their vote

³⁸ Ansolabehere and Iyengar, *Going Negative*, 10.

³⁹ Cheng, *Jingxuan guangguo, lilun, celue yanjiu anli*, 45-49.

⁴⁰ Kavanagh, *Election Campaigning: The New Marketing of Politics*, 18-20.

after watching this spot. “Hope,” on the other hand, had attracted them only at a comparatively superficial level. However, “Hope” might have accomplished something equally important if we examine it in the election’s context.

Many DPP audiences said that they would have voted for Chen, regardless of their exposure to “Safety.” However, the ad aroused strongly negative feelings among the KMT’s participants, perhaps cancelling its positive contribution to Chen among DPP voters. In commercial advertising, rarely do audiences experience such strong emotions about brands and advertisements. “Hope,” on the other hand, although not perceived as a great ad from the responses, successfully reminded the audiences about Chen’s popularity and competence, without provoking their opposition. This is similar to some well-known commercial brands’ marketing communication strategies, which are mainly for the purpose of reinforcement.

Another strategic concern is related to the public’s familiarity with the candidate and the party. Chen Shui-bian had a long career in politics and received massive media attention during his time as a defense lawyer for the *Tangwai* (黨外) individuals, as a legislator, and as the Mayor of Taipei.⁴¹ “Safety” permitted the audience to see a different side of him, which could be considered a mark of the ad’s success. However, if the voters already had an existing negative attitude about Chen’s previous political performance, the benefits of portraying him as an ordinary citizen who, as president, would not place his own family, much less his neighbor’s, in danger by adopting a reckless approach to cross-Strait relations, could have been diminished. As for “Hope,” it was refreshing at the time because the celebrities it featured acted as a safety net for the voters who wanted a change but were worried about the uncertainty associated with it. The celebrities’ endorsements promoted the voters’ “time to change” mindset. Furthermore, Chen successfully combined advertising and public relations in order to maximize media coverage of his campaign and his theme of “hope” in the election. Therefore, the key lesson of “Hope” might lie in its integrated approach under the overall campaign scheme. Similar to established commercial brands, repositioning is often more difficult than adding new elements. Furthermore, advertising’s influence alone is limited unless it is accompanied by a joint marketing effort.

Having reviewed the two spots’ managerial implications, we now turn to Taiwan’s political marketing environment when compared to other democracies, as well as to the matter of the Americanization of politics internationally. For some scholars,⁴² the Americanization of politics means that “strategies that are

⁴¹ Kuo, *Mingjingdang zhuanxing zhi tong*, 204-208, and Rigger, *From Opposition to Power*, 176-178.

⁴² Hans J. Kleinsteuber, “Comparing Mass Communication Systems: Media Formats, Media Contents, and Media Process,” in *Comparing Political Communication: Theories, Cases, and Challenges*, ed. Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 76.

successful in the United States are carefully observed and consequently copied in other countries.” At various times, elections in the United Kingdom,⁴³ France,⁴⁴ and Taiwan⁴⁵ have been reported as Americanized. However, there are different opinions about the degree to which Americanization still holds true. For instance, Rawnsley⁴⁶ suggests that the globalization and increasing professionalism of political marketing is a more appropriate understanding today, even though the United States pioneered these dynamics and is advanced in many techniques. However, although it is generally agreed that the United States pioneered many of the existing political marketing approaches, it is also widely accepted that different political systems often have developed their own style. It seems that the ongoing debate is not about the degree to which there has been American “export” of political marketing methods to the world, but about the extent to which other countries have adopted these ideas. In our comparative studies of political marketing practitioners in Taiwan and the United Kingdom, we found that both groups believed that their practices, although influenced by the United States in the past, had developed into a unique approach by now, due to reasons such as regulation, media consumption preferences, and culture.⁴⁷

Despite the fact that the history of competitive elections in Taiwan is shorter than in the United States and the United Kingdom, Taiwan’s use of political advertising and its audiences are relatively mature, as observed during the conduct of this research. The “Safety” and “Hope” ads were able to capitalize on the issues and presentation styles that were deemed important to the voters, while the audiences also displayed their independent thinking, despite the polarization of party politics, which is a crucial and significant mark of a young democracy.

Concluding Comments

This essay has reported the findings of a study in which thirty-seven respondents were recruited for six focus groups, each of which consisted of either KMT or DPP supporters. It examined how the participants interpreted two of the DPP’s image-building political advertisements, aired during the 2000 presidential

⁴³ Sebastian Berry, “Labour’s Strategy and the Media,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 45, no.4 (1992): 565.

⁴⁴ Lynda Lee Kaid, J. Jacques Gerstle, and Keith R. Sanders, “Constructing a Political Communication Project in Two Cultures, in *Mediated Politics in Two Cultures*, ed. Lynda Lee Kaid, J. Jacques Gerstle, and Keith R. Sanders (New York: Praeger, 1991), 1.

⁴⁵ Rawnsley, “As Edifying as a Bout of ‘Mud Wrestling’: The 2000 Presidential Election Campaign in Taiwan,” 103-123.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Peng and Hackley, “Political Marketing Communications Planning in the UK and Taiwan: Comparative Insights from Leading Practitioners,” 483-498.

election in Taiwan.

The findings suggest that partisanship continues to play an important role in Taiwanese politics. However, the ability and willingness of young, educated individuals to interpret political media texts autonomously was also clear. They are reflective voters who can and will adopt a critical view.

Each election is unique and requires a tailor-made advertising strategy that takes into account a wide range of issues within the macro- and micro-environment. It is also essential for academics who are studying political advertising to bear this in mind when designing an appropriate research approach. While our findings are limited in terms of the ability to generalize from them due to the interpretive nature of the study and the time lag between the presidential election and the discussion of the focus groups, this study has offered interesting insights into the use of political advertising in Taiwan with regard to two particular kinds of creative approach. Although this is only a glimpse into one aspect of political advertising, what cannot be doubted is that there is still much to learn about the voters in Taiwan, as well as about Taiwan's electioneering and democratic practices in comparison to countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom.

Epilogue

The 2000 election was very significant in Taiwan's democratic history. At the same time, the political advertisements of its respective campaigns will be remembered as a milestone in Taiwan's political marketing development. However, according to some later observations, Taiwan's election campaigning style seems to have changed since 2000.

On the one hand, the DPP's use of the mass media through advertising during the 2004 presidential campaign appeared to be even more negative than in 2000, and less creative. The KMT, on the other hand, started in 2004 to demonstrate its ability to carry out a modern media campaign, despite its bitter defeat in that year's presidential election. Notwithstanding continued use of political advertising, in 2004, both parties seemed to look backward to Taiwan's traditional campaigning methods—canvassing and events to drum-up support. These two approaches to garner public support both date back to the elections during the period of Japanese colonization.

Following the 2004 presidential campaign, the DPP seemed to become a victim of its internal corruption and radical political communication. After a disastrous defeat during local elections, in 2008, DPP presidential candidate Frank Hsieh (謝長廷) fought a rather unsurprising but quality campaign against KMT candidate Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九), the latter nevertheless winning the election, ending the DPP's eight-year control of the executive office.

In terms of electioneering strategy, Ma Ying-jeou's "long stay" visits were the highlight of all campaigning activity. During these visits to areas of Taiwan with few mainlanders and deep suspicions of them, Ma was able to

convince significant numbers of voters that he was concerned about matters of importance to Taiwanese and that, as president, he would not “sell-out” Taiwan to the interests of the People’s Republic of China. The visits not only captured the media spotlight and the public’s favorable attention, but also they became the material for Ma’s political advertisements. What this will bring to Taiwan’s future elections and elections in other countries will be an interesting observation.

